



☆ NIGHTFLOWER'S NIGHTMARE ☆

"Mommy, lookit!"

The little girl pointed to a big broken store dummy, someone's idea of a joke. It lay a few feet away in the grass of an empty lot.

Mommy moved closer to get a better look. It was not a broken store dummy. She let out an ear-piercing scream, which her daughter will never, can never, forget. The little girl being escorted to school at 7:30 on the sunny Southern California morning of January 15, 1947, had happened on a *Grand Guignol* tableau that would give mother

and daughter nightmares forever.

The pieces, laid out for display as if by a roadside vendor, were the halves of the nude body of a young woman. It had been neatly bisected at the waist. Miss Tweedle-Dum and Tweedle-Dee. The slashed breasts were covered with cigarette burns. The mouth had been cut at the corners into a frightful leer. The victim's head had been bashed almost beyond recognition—but that wasn't the worst of it. There were mutilations all over her body, the strangest of which was a deep triangular







gouge in her thigh. The thigh had once been decorated by a rose tattoo. The autopsy revealed the hunk of tattooed flesh, where it had been occulted deep within her anatomy. Rope burns on her slim wrists and the milky white skin of her ankles indicated that she had been tightly trussed during a torture session that must have lasted three days.

The intersection of South Norton Avenue and 39th Street, in the Crenshaw area of southwest L.A., was soon crowded with cops, reporters, and the merely curious: The Black Dahlia Case was born.

The housewife who came upon the body reported seeing a light coupe cruising by, which sped off when she screamed at her grisly discovery. She could not describe the car in any detail.

When the victim's fingerprints were sent to Washington, she was identified. Her prints had originally been taken when she worked at the PX at Camp

Cooke, California, during World War II. Records at the camp yielded her mother's whereabouts—Cambridge, Massachusetts. The victim's life history slowly emerged.

Name: Elizabeth Short. Age: 22. Height: 5'5". Weight: 120 pounds. Race: Caucasian. Sex: Female. Description: Black hair, blue eyes. Distinguishing marks: Rose tattoo on left thigh.

She had been reared in Hyde Park, Massachusetts, suffered through a mundane middle-class childhood, and left for Hollywood—the Land of Milk and Honey—at eighteen. It was not long before she slid into prostitution. The last time she had been seen by anyone other than her butcher was on the night of January 10, 1947, at 10 P.M., when the doorman of the Biltmore Hotel in downtown L.A. noticed her walking south on Olive Street, clad in black sweater and slacks.

But who was the Dahlia really? It later



▲ Three faces of Elizabeth: mug shots and portrait ►





turned out that the victim's nickname had derived from her lustrous black hair, usually worn in a bouffant pompadour, and her habit of dressing in black sweaters and slacks. Her corpse when discovered, however, had *red* hair. It had been hennaed—although she had never in her life used henna—shampooed, and carefully set. She died a Scarlet Woman. The maniacal meticulousness of it all was startling. The remains had been drained of all blood and freshly washed kosher clean. The butcher was intent on making an indelible last impression.

The coroner's report was laconic. It conjectured a likely seventy-two-hour torture session, which eventually led to a methodical vivisection. After the blood had been drained, the pieces had been cleaned, and the hair shampooed, hennaed, and set, the two halves of Elizabeth Short had been deposited at 39th and Norton.

The discovery of her body set in motion the biggest LAPD crime hunt in the city's history. Two hundred and fifty officers held door-to-door investigations in the neighborhood where the corpse

had been discovered. False leads and false confessions led the cops on a number of wild goose chases.

Hollywood has been plagued by a notorious history of bizarre sex and crime stories. After forty years, the Black Dahlia case remains the most appalling of Tinseltown's murder cases. The Dahlia's connection with the movie industry was marginal, more of an unrealized dream than anything else. Like thousands of others, she had been drawn to the area "to break into movies." Her story belongs to L.A.'s Shadowland, a twilight zone haunted by the mystery of her murder to this day.

The murder of the beautiful drifter who was "offed" so horribly in 1947 has set wheels in motion in more than one sick psyche: in the years since then, more than fifty men and a passel of bulldykes have "confessed" to the vivisection.

In *True Confessions*, a movie based on John Gregory Dunne's novel of the same name, which vaguely resembled the case, the killer is eventually uncovered by policeman Robert Duvall. In reality, the Black Dahlia's murderer was never found.

